

## **Housing Directorate Report to Housing Tenants' Strategic Board**

### **25<sup>th</sup> January 2021**

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#### **Director of Housing and Communities Introduction**

Since the last report in November our main focus continues to be COVID-19 and particularly since the New Year re-adjusting the services to respond to the latest lock down measures. I would like to acknowledge the flexibility of the team and of partner organisations and contractors to once again make substantial changes to what services we offer, and to tenants who have been accommodating and understanding. We will continue to closely monitor issues.

Since the New Year we have not seen any significant impacts from Brexit with our supply chains holding up.

Elsewhere our project to replace our main housing management IT system has kicked off, this is a major piece of work and will run for around 16 months. Lastly it was pleasing to see improvements in our Star survey satisfaction results particularly that in the last two years we have been through major organisational changes and experienced nearly a year of COVID impacts.

#### **Housing Development and Regeneration Team**

##### **Housing Strategy**

- Single Homeless Accommodation Strategy - The service is producing an accommodation strategy to respond to the Government aspiration to maintain accommodation support to reduce or end rough sleeping by 2025. The strategy will help inform the Council's partnership and investment decisions.
- The Homelessness Reduction Board is progressing to commence its work early 2021.
- LHA Housing Advisors Programme – Somerset councils and ARK consultancy have submitted the draft report into Better Futures for Vulnerable People in Somerset. This sets out how Somerset authorities work to support the most vulnerable people, provides examples of good practice and sets under six themes opportunities to delivery better outcomes. The report will support the Homeless Reduction Board set its priorities and action.
- A delivery officer is being recruited to the team to deliver and oversee the Hinckley point C Housing Action Plan.

- The revised Private Sector Renew Policy was considered and supported by full council in December.

## HRA New Homes

- Laxton Road Development completion and handover took place 15<sup>th</sup> January providing 8 new HRA homes. Here are a couple of photos of the build just before the finishing touches were put in place.



- Zero Carbon Pilot – The procurement of a volumetric modular contractor was not successful. The Development Team are progressing zero carbon through a more traditional approach. Although some time has been lost, the specification and approach to be adopted is established and the lessons learned have already been adopted on this and other projects. Lessons are also being shared with other local authorities, community led housing and registered provider partners.
- Oxford Inn – This scheme gained support from members in December and will provide new zero carbon homes by Spring 2023.
- Seaward Way, Minehead – The community is currently being consulted on this scheme of 54 units, through social media and other formats. The scheme will be submitted to planning in the next two months. This scheme will be zero carbon and delivered by Autumn 2023. Here are some images of how the site will look:



- North Taunton Woolaway Project – The final designs for phase A are complete and contract costs are being finalised through the Pre Construction Services Agreement (PCSA). Members supported the scheme at Full Council in December and a cross party working group is being formed to ensure the Council’s new build housing programme has the focus and support which its scale merits. An approach is being adopted initially for phase A to achieve 80% zero carbon at first letting and 100% zero carbon when the grid decarbonises. This approach means a moderate investment in fabric and technology will reduce by nine times the carbon produced by the new homes compared to a standard (part L) new build homes; and by twelve times compared to a Woolaway home. Fuel savings to the customers are

calculated to be 70%-80%. A report has been placed in the member library on the approach and assumptions.

### **Housing Property Team**

Following the government's recent lockdown/Tier 5 announcements, we have undertaken a review of services and those listed below have been deemed essential to our customers and therefore need to be maintained. This decision has been taken with an awareness of continuing COVID-19 challenges, in particular the current high number of positive COVID cases in Taunton and Wellington. Our Risk Assessments and Method Statements (RAMS) are being reviewed to ensure the ongoing safety of our staff and residents whilst these works are undertaken.

- Responsive Repairs - Emergency works, and all external works (i.e. both emergency and non-emergency works) only. We will continue to log all requests for repairs and make contact with residents to arrange appointments when appropriate to do so.
- Property Safety Compliance checks and works all to continue – including gas safety checks (LGSR's), water risk assessments and remedial works, electrical inspections (EICR's), asbestos surveys and re-inspections, fire risk assessment and remedial works & fire safety checks, and lift and stair-lift checks and remedial works.
- Compliance includes ongoing block inspections and estate walkabouts where officers will focus on identifying safety hazards.
- Asset Management visits: Stock Condition Surveys and Energy Assessments to cease (other than SCS's and EPC's in Voids).
- Voids repair works to continue (with updated RAMS in place); pre-void visits to pause.
- Capital Programme – Roofline, external painting, door replacement, roofing, and door entry systems to continue. All other planned capital works programmes to be put on hold.

### **Responsive Repairs and Void Repairs**

- The hold placed on non-emergency internal responsive repairs will inevitably lead to an increasing backlog of works. This will be monitored closely and options for tackling this will be considered during the 'lockdown' period. Residents will be advised of the situation via communications on the Council's website and when they contact us with a repair request.
- Void repairs are likely to take longer due to updated COVID RAMS (for example, fewer trades working in the property at one time to reinforce social distancing).

### **Property Safety Compliance**

We are maintaining ongoing progress on property safety compliance activities, including:

- A review of all common areas for blocks of flats to validate existing safety actions.
- Asbestos management surveys and re-inspections.
- Fire Risk Assessments (FRAs).
- Remedial actions from previous FRAs, and maintenance inspections.
- Gas Safety checks.
- Water Risk assessments and remedial actions.
- Electrical checks to both communal areas and dwellings.
- Passenger lift and stair-lift safety checks.

## **Capital Programmes**

- Additional procurement for future capital programmes is being undertaken.
- Only the works as listed above are to continue for the present. We are contacting all residents affected by capital programmes placed on hold, and will closely monitor to see when it is possible to recommence some, or all, of these programmes when it is considered safe to do so.
- We will not now be able to complete all planned capital works programmes by the end of March 2021. We are evaluating the financial and service delivery implications of this situation and the impact on next year's budgets.

## **Housing and Communities Teams**

### **Extra Care Housing**

- SWT continue to work with Way Ahead Care (commissioned by SCC) in our Extra Care Housing sites. We have revisited the lockdown arrangements to ensure we keep residents safe, whilst still allowing support to be delivered safely. This has necessitated the cessation of visitors to the schemes to minimise the risk of COVID infection.

### **Sheltered Housing**

- The Sheltered Housing Team have been working across the whole of sheltered housing, making welfare calls to tenants, updating their personal and health information and making home visits where necessary, to complete aids and adaptations assessments, tenancy sign ups, install Lifelines and support tenants who find using the phone challenging due to hearing impairment for example.
- Due to lockdown we will be ensuring that face-to-face visits are only done by exception when a telephone call cannot resolve the issue. During any visits, staff will wear PPE and are required to follow the relevant risk assessment guidance for these visits.
- We are aware that many tenants have less contact with family and friends. In some cases, this has left them feeling lonely and isolated. Where appropriate and helpful, we have continued to encourage tenants to have regular welfare calls from Deane Helpline, to check on their welfare and have a brief chat. Deane Helpline report any concerns for a tenants welfare or health back to the team, and a member of staff calls the tenant, to find out more and complete relevant referrals etc. In many

cases, this includes liaising with family members and next of kin, who have also been appreciative of the follow up we have provided.

- We had planned to have a partial reopening of the meeting halls within the sheltered schemes; however the continuing evolving picture with COVID means that this remains on hold.

## **Lettings**

- Property advertising and lettings that were suspended at the beginning of the first lockdown have now resumed and we plan to continue these as we re-enter lockdown again. Properties will continue to be advertised on Home Finder Somerset on the weekly cycles.
- The Lettings team are still working to COVID-19 risk assessments and procedures, ensuring they are in line with the SWT safe working practices. Verifications continue to be carried out remotely, and COVID compliant viewings are taking place by the prospective tenant independently.
- The Home Moves Plus officer (HMP) started in November. The officer has already commenced working with both internal and external partners to collect data on those SWT tenants that fall within the downsizing remit for the role. This post will provide invaluable support to help people downsize which will reduce the burden of those struggling with 'bedroom tax' as well as releasing larger accommodation for households in housing need
- Laxton Road Flats: The Lettings team advertised the eight new properties on Home Finder Somerset (HFS), shortlisted applicants in line with the agreed local lettings plan, verified and will sign up all tenants on the week commencing 11<sup>th</sup> January with a planned tenancy start date of 18<sup>th</sup> January.

## **Somerset Independence Plus (SIP)**

- Only essential and outdoor work continues and all other construction has ceased due to the return of lockdown. The team have revisited the various risk assessments and updated them accordingly.
- The SIP partnership held an introduction session with Homeless Managers and staff to introduce their new hoarding service, outlining the support they and partners can bring to those tenants who struggle with hoarding, particularly where this becomes a significant issue in terms of tenant welfare, quality of life and fire hazards. We have now started to make referrals into this service for support.

## **Homefinder**

- We have taken on an additional temporary member of staff to reduce the backlog of outstanding Homefinder enquiries and the backlog is now reducing. Furthermore we have sent a bulk email to 1100 applicants needing a 1, 2 or 3 bed property who had not accessed their application or bid in over a year. Only 61 responded and so the remainder have been closed down. This effectively cleanses the data to include only applicants that currently need accommodation and are bidding and we can then continue to run renewals in smaller batches for the rest of the register.
- The most recent changes to Homefinder policy have been approved and have gone live on the Homefinder Somerset website from 5<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

- The contract for the procurement of the new system for Homefinder Somerset is progressing and interviews are currently taking place of shortlisted bidders, with the intention of agreeing the new (or incumbent) provider by the end of January

## **Income**

- The Rent Recovery team continue to work to help and support those tenants who are effected by a reduction in income due to COVID-19. Rent arrears have reduced to 571k (as at 04/12/20), a further £15k reduction on the previous month and £220k below the level at the start of the Lean Review in September 2019. This is a fantastic result for the team and shows the hard work and dedication they have all committed through the pandemic.
- The team rolled out a Christmas Rent Campaign which included text messages, providing information on paying rent on the website and also taking part in the Talking Café held by the Village Agents to promote priority payments over the Christmas period.
- We have recruited a second Debt and Benefit Officer who has started and this enables us to help a larger number of tenants quicker. We want to ensure that our tenants are claiming all the benefits they are entitled to and are maximising their income.

## **Anti-Social Behaviour**

- Serious ASB/neighbour nuisance is still high on the team's agenda and we have a small number of serious cases that we are escalating. These cases will need to have enforcement action taken against them and this in turn is extremely work intensive.
- The previous lockdown led to minor nuisance cases coming to our attention and it is likely that this trend will continue with the new lockdown. We will utilise our COVID-19 nuisance letters from the last lockdown to try to deal with this. If these do not settle down then we will work with the Police to carry out joint visits if necessary and take any necessary action to get the perpetrators to amend their behaviour.
- We are still exploring the option of using a mobile noise app to deal with low level complaints that we receive. We will review this at the end of a trial period to decide whether we are going to be buying into this service.

## **Tenancy/Estate Team**

- The team has restarted Estate Walkabouts and been continuing with block inspections and our programme of these is published on our website. We have a process and pro-forma monitoring forms and managers work closely with officers to ensure that we have consistency in all areas across the district. During a recent inspection of the area within North Taunton we have picked up that a number of pathways need to be made safe; moss to be cleared from some pathways; trees need cutting back from flats; new street signage is needed; pot holes in garage areas need to be repaired. Once the orders have been raised we will be providing feedback to residents of our findings. We intend to continue to do Estate

Walkabouts during the new lockdown, although we will primarily be focussing on hazards and health and safety.

- The estates team and open spaces team have been working together to help improve the areas where our tenants live. These photos show a before and after of some work carried out to the front gardens at Style Flats in Wiveliscombe:



- We have started proactive Annual Tenancy Checks with an officer visiting households to assess the condition of the tenancy and property, however these will need to be put on hold during the new lockdown.

**Housing Performance Team**

Since our last report in November we have completed the following key pieces of work:

- The team produced a 16 page Christmas newsletter which was posted to tenants and leaseholders. It was also made available on the website and to 222 email subscribers.
- The Tenants' Annual Report covering the period 2019-20 has been published to our website (this was delayed due to COVID lockdown but has now been completed and published).
- A STAR survey of our tenants and leaseholders has concluded and draft reports have been received (see summary below). The STAR survey is a comprehensive satisfaction survey completed every two years by an independent company (Acuity). We will now work on our response to these survey results, communicate them to our tenants, staff and provide information on our planned actions.
- Produced a summary of the government white paper "new deal for social housing" and shared that with our staff and tenant groups.
- Linked to the white paper, we have completed a self-assessment of our complaints process against the new Housing Ombudsman code and are putting into place any actions to address any gaps.
- We have ensured that our business areas have prepared business continuity plans.
- We have supported our managers to consult our Tenants' Strategic Group on over 10 policy documents (since September 2020).
- The team have agreed terms of reference for our Tenants' Action Group, including independent assessment of the terms of reference from TPAS.
- We have developed new webpages to enable our tenants to access information including information on programme maintenance, walkabouts and block inspections.
- Internally we have ensured that regular governance meetings are held to oversee and manage the activities of the housing directorate e.g. programme management meetings, finance and performance and risk meetings.
- Reviewed how our internal customer contact software routes enquiries to our staff.

During the next two months we will:

- Formally invite candidates for the Tenants' Strategic Group election.
- Create a response and action plan to share the final results of the STAR survey.
- Continue to support online meetings of our tenants' groups.
- Continue to develop webpages.
- Continue to consult on our housing policy documents.
- Continue to strengthen our internal governance through our meetings and reporting.
- Self-assess against the government white paper.

### **STAR Survey Summary**

Whilst we await the final STAR tenant satisfaction report our draft report indicates the following highlights:

The results from the survey are very positive, and generally a little up on the results from the previous survey in 2018. The survey recorded many high ratings including satisfaction with the gas servicing arrangements (95%), having a home that is safe and secure (91%), the rent providing value for money (88%), the neighbourhood (85%), and its appearance (84%) – all of which are reflected in the finding that 83% of tenants are satisfied with the services provided by Somerset West and Taunton.

Key Findings are:

- Over eight out of ten tenants are satisfied with the services provided by SWT (83%), the overall quality of their home (81%) its condition (80%) and the repair service (82%). 78% are satisfied that SWT keeps them informed about things that might affect them as a resident.
- Slightly fewer are satisfied that SWT listens to their views and acts upon them (62%). Satisfaction with most aspects of contacting the council are also a little lower. 67% found it easy to contact the right person, 65% feel the staff keep their promises and 69% were satisfied with the final outcome of their contact.

Suggestions for improvements:

- There are 574 comments giving suggestions on possible improvements to the service, however, 17% of these said they are happy with things as they are. Customer contact accounts for 12% of the comments for possible improvements, with tenants wanting better customer care and for staff to answer the phones more readily and to return calls when promised. The repairs service concerns 9% of comments with tenants wanting a better, quicker service and to be kept informed of progress. Other issues mentioned include communications, grounds maintenance and dealing with neighbourhood issues.

Day-to-day repairs and maintenance service:

- There are 82% of tenants satisfied with the repairs and maintenance service, and this has increased by 7% since the previous survey. Overall satisfaction with the last completed repair is 86%, and 95% are satisfied with gas servicing arrangements.

Communication and information:

- Nearly eight out of ten tenants (78%) are satisfied that SWT keeps them informed about things that might affect them. However, fewer are satisfied that SWT listens to their views and acts upon them (62%) with 17% dissatisfied.

Further analysis:

Throughout the survey some very good levels of satisfaction have been found, and the findings are an endorsement of the commitment of Somerset West and Taunton and its staff. However, slightly lower levels of satisfaction are also found particularly related to communication issues with the final outcome of the query, listening to views and acting upon them amongst the lower ratings.

Overall, having come through major organisational change and to also be in the midst of COVID-19, it is an achievement for many areas to have increased their levels of satisfaction. Upon receipt of the final report we will communicate results with our tenants, our staff and start the process of responding to the findings to improve our tenants' satisfaction with our services.